Den of Ak-Sar-Ben Hallowed by Many Memories of Great Events

WHAT Samson needs is a new home. We ought to try to make enough money to rebuild the Den."

Thus spoke a member to one of the board of governors one evening, when the general prosperity of the order of Ak-Sar-Ben was under discussion, and the great crowd of prominent citizens that filled the arena gave ample evidence of the popularity of the king and his active chamberlain.

And the member of the board of governors looked thoughtful and said:

"No; we do not need a new Den."

One morning in the early spring Gus and myself sat together in the big arena. It was as empty as it ever gets. He was sitting on a box, while I occupied an upturned empty keg, and we were planning for the summer campaign. A few marks on the floor, some notes on a scrap of paper and a general, hazy vision of what was to come filled our minds, and the talk was pleasantly reminiscent and equally pleasantly anticipated. The fun of the proposition was beginning to creep in on us as we planned and thought of how the plans would work out. Various "stunts," as Gus calls the maneuvers, were discussed and discarded and order was coming out of a generally nebulous state of mind. Then Gus was called to the 'phone, and for a few moments I was left alone. Cigar and surroundings were conducive to reflection and the reverie into which my thoughts wandered seemed as natural as the act of breathing. The cool depths of the great building were lighted by vagrant rays from the spring sun, sifting in through the dust-covered skylights; soft airs stirred now and again through the vast recesses, the rafters and great truss beams were bare, save for here and there a fluttering shred of last year's decoration. It was like a seat in a cathedral, whose mystic stillness has inspired great poems. Presently my thoughts began to take on other shapes and a procession of events flitted through my mind. It was an irresistible tide of recollections and the emptiness of the Den vanished and I saw it people with great throngs.

My first visit to the Coliseum was when sent there to get a "story" about the bicycle race in progress between Jack Prince and "Soldier" Ned Reading. I found the huge building full, while Twentieth street in front was blocked as it had never been before or since. Each of that multitude was waiting for news from within and each announcement of the progress of the riders was greeted with cheers. Omaha was bicycle-mad at the time and the racing man was king. How many can now name over the list—Ashinger, Eck, Reading, Prince, Morgan, Martin—a veritable host of lusty young men, who made the riding of the "high" wheel a business and earned an uncertain livelihood by grinding through soul-trying days and nights of unceasing effort to cover more miles in three days, or six days, or some other number, than had ever been covered before in the same time. What acclaim would welcome them, or any one of them, now? And at that time he was indeed a prince among his fellows who strode the wheel and pushed along his weary way, keeping in with the bunch, no matter how desperate his chances or sore his need. And with these were the "ladies" of the game. Cannot some of you recall the cheers that echoed in the tingling ears of Lillie Williams, when she finished ahead of Louise Armaindo and won her right to a place among the "professionals?" Lillie laid down her printer's stick and rule in The Bee office and went forth to conquer, and conquered. Then came "Beauty" Baldwin and others, who created some slight havoc among the more impressionable and won a brief period of conquest. But the flame was sputtering low in the lamp of the indoor racing craze and the "safety" was driving the ordinary out of the field. And, must it be said?—the sporting public was beginning to question the probity of the proceedings at the Coliseum, and some even had the effrontery to remark that the races were not exactly contested on the track. So a change came over the spirit of the dream.

Between bicycle races various sorts of entertainment were put on to enliven the routine of life and keep folks interested in the Coliseum. One of these will live forever in the memory of those who saw its denouement. "Senator" Morgan was the instigator of the "grand sacred" wolf fight that occurred there one Saturday night in the spring of 1889. Alluring advertisements had been circulated telling of the excitement that would follow the contest between the dogs and the wolf, which animal was described as being especially fierce and eager for a fight. On Saturday night the accustomed crowd was assembled at the Coliseum, some 4,000 odd people having paid a quarter each to secure admission to the arena. Out in the center of the track a strong barricade of barb wire had been built, inclosing a considerable space in which the deadly encounter was to occur. All precautions had been taken to insure the safety of the spectators and any fears that may have been felt were quieted by the "senator's" announcement that strong guards had been posted about the arena, so it would not be possible for the maddened wolf to get among the people and devour any of them. In the center of the enclosure was a cage strong enough to hold a Numidian lion, and in this cage was ensconced the man-eater, who was soon to be turned loose on the dogs, held in leash by Charley Jackson and Bill Mardis. Finally the signal was given. The dogs were unchained and their keepers scurried for the gate that let them out to safety. One brave man alone remained in the enclosure that was soon to be the scene of carnage. He stealthily crept up to the cage, unfastened and opened the door and fled to the gate, which was quickly opened and closed, with the man on the outside. Then the fierce and ravenous wolf came forth—a miserable, mangy coyote that would'nt have fought with a prairie dog. The dogs looked at the wolf and the wolf at the dogs, and then they smelled one another and—proceeded to fraternize. No amount of urging or "sic 'em" could start a fight among that happy assemblage of curs of low degree, and finally it came over the crowd that the wolf fight was like a good many of the so-called bicycle races and the assemblage melted away.

Only a few months later the arena at the Coliseum presented a contrast as sharp, and probably as violent, as possible. Instead of the eager thousands, in whose veins flowed blood stirred at the sight of men or women wearily pushing their way around the track on bicycles or gaping fixedly at a group of animals, waiting to see them rend each other, the softer side of man's nature had drawn thither an entirely different class of people. Under the lights were gathered the culture and intellect, the wealth and beauty and fashion of the territory of which Omaha is the center. Jewels flashed and shoulders gleamed, and handsome men in black and white stood around or moved quietly about, while the swish of silk and lace was the only sound. It was as brilliant an audience, probably, as any Omaha has ever seen out, and at that time equaled, if it did not excel, any that had ever gathered in the city. And it had a wonderful occasion to observe, for the air of the Coliseum thrilled that night with some of the sweetest sounds it had ever vibrated to. It was grand opera, and for three performances the rough building housed one of the most remarkable groups of "song birds"—Patti, Nordica, Scalchi, Tamagno and others whose names are writ high in the Temple of Music—sang there and there received the plaudits of the people, who rejoiced that the Coliseum made it possible that so great an opera troupe might be accommodated in Omaha and tickets be set at a price something lower than a king's ransom.

In other days that followed other musicians were heard there. "Paddy" Gilmore's band, led by the popular Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore in his own proper person, there played his programs that were as much his own as was that beatific smile he sent like a benison over the wildly applauding throng who cheered him at the end of each number. And his arrangement of "The Star Spangled Banner," with artillery accompaniment—that audience didn't need the example of the military men present to rise and stand while that number was played. The latent patriotism in each breats was fanned into flame by the strains of the great national air, and the assemblage was on its feet, ready to cheer its approval of song and rendition, long before the salvo of artillery had punctuated the second bar of the refrain:

'Tis the Star Spangled Banner (Boom! Boom!)
Oh, long may it wave (Boom! Boom! Boom!)
O'er the land of the free (Boom! Boom!)
And the home of the brave (Boom! Boom! Crash! Boom!)

That was Paddy Gilmore's own idea, and he made it "go" with the rest of his countrymen. Of course, he played other pieces, and a great chorus, directed by B. B. Young, and led by Madame Mazzacuto Young, sang, and the festival was a tremendous success. And after Gilmore came Theodore Thomas, with his wonderful orchestra, and another feast was furnished whose savor is still sweet in memory. Thomas played for us that afternoon Beethoven's "Unfinished Symphony," and it was probably never better played. And still another year Edward Strauss, fresh from the imperial palace at Vienna, played for us Strauss waltzes and bowed his funny little bow, a nervous jerk of the head that was not a bow and hardly came up to the requirements of a nod, and by his unbending attitude chilled a warm western welcome into a coldly formal afternoon for a fine gathering of cultured people, who listened almost in silence to the strains of a band of musicians whose individuality had been entirely subjugated by the leader's stiffness and unamiable personality. But no such waltz music has been heard elsewhere in Omaha. Other music has been heard there—May festivals, local choral efforts and noted orchestras, and the notes of the birds are still heard among the beams of the roof.

Another scene flits across the mind. A gathering of earnest, thoughtful men is assembled at the Coliseum. Grave projects occupy them. It is their firm belief that the time has come when patriotism and their duty to mankind requires that they form a new political party and publish its platform of principles to the world. And there, on July 4, 1892, the people's independent party was born, and, with General James B. Weaver as its candidate for president of the United States, went before the world to champion principles of government and reforms in administration it deemed essential to the good of mankind, the perpetuation of our institutions. It was not all accomplished in one day, nor without great travail. For days Omaha had been corwded with the earnest farmers who came to give their aid and advice in forming the new party. And among the workers were men of might, like Ignatius Donnelley of Minnesota, the "Sage of Nininger," General Weaver, and many others who have been ever in the very front of the fight for certain ideas. It was thought for some time that Walter Q. Gresham would be the nominee for president, and only at the very last moment did he decline and allow the honor of heading the new party to go to General Weaver.

McKinley spoke at the Coliseum and Thurston and Bryan and a host of others needless to recount here. It was there that Henry D. Estabrook delivered his wonderfully telling denunciation of the A. P. A. movement, when the citizens were up in revolt against that organization. And it was there the first "dollar dinner" of the Bryan campaign in 1896 was held. On one occasion Mr. Bryan acted as ringmaster for a society circus at the Coliseum.

Again and again did the Coliseum revert to its original uses and witness a renewal of bicycle racing. Six-day races and shorter races were held from time to time, and wrestling matches, tug-of-war contests and other similar sporting events were held at intervals. About every form of indoor sport has been indulged in there but prize fighting. If ever a boxing match was held at the Coliseum it was done so quietly that no record of it has been kept.

In one of his stories of the southland Harry Stillwell Edwards tells of an old elm tree that grew beside a cabin. One of its limbs reached out over the roof of the cabin and at times, when the wind was swaying the branches of the tree, this limb would touch the shingles and tap gently on them. An "elbow" in the limb formed a cup, and to this cup would come a bird, with a mulberry in the season, and pound it in the cup until it gave up its juice, and then he would drink the juice and in the ecstacy of his intoxication would pour forth the most wonderful of bird songs. And the man who lived in that cabin would lie awake at night listening to the tapping of the branch on the shingles, and it was music to him. And, one summer he lay sick for many weeks, and while he was stretched on his bed weak and helpless the bird came with the mulberry and pounded it to a pulp in the cup of the limb, and then sang its wonderful song. And day after day, and night after night, the man listened to the music of the elm tree and the curled-up shingle on the roof, and the pounding of the mulberry in the cup, and the bird's full-throated, joyous song of thankful exultation for life and mulberry juice, and the music in his soul awakened. So that when he was well again and a storm tore the branch from the tree and tossed it to the ground he fashioned from it a musical instrument that was neither a fiddle or a banjo, but a combination; and the cup, stained with the mulberry juice, and the shingle on which it had been pounded by wind and bird, were made parts of the instrument. And through all that section of the country its music was famous.

Doesn't it seem that something of tradition, or at least association, clusters around the old Coliseum, now the Den of Ak-Sar-Ben? In this nothing has been said of the fourteen years it has been the scene each summer of the most remarkable gatherings of business men and professional men of all grades and ranks, in the most perfect of good fellowship and unanimity of purpose to push forward for Nebraska and the west; nor has anything been said of the social magnificence of the splendid balls that have marked the annual ceremony of coronation of King and Queen of Ak-Sar-Ben. The Den may need a new floor, but it ought to be reverently preserved for its past. It isn't so old as to be venerable—only twenty years—but it has more of real tradition, perhaps, than any other building now standing in Omaha, and so deserves to be preserved as long as its timbers will safely stand together.

McC.

Royal Genealogical Tree of Ak-Sar-Ben

King.	Reign.	Queen.
E. M. Bartlett	I	Miss Meloria Woolworth
Casper E. Yost	II	Miss Mae Dundy
Edward P. Peck	III	Miss Gertrude Kountze
R. S. Wilcox	IV	Miss Grace Allen
W. D. McHugh	V	Miss Ethel Morse
F. A. Nash	VI	Miss Mildred Lomax
H. J. Penfold	VII	Miss Edith Smith
T. A. Fry	VIII	Miss Ella Cotton
Fred Metz	IX	Miss Bessie Brady
Charles H. Pickens	X	Miss Ada Kirkendall
Gurdon W. Wattles	XI	Miss Mary Lee McShane
Gould Dietz	XII	Miss Margaret Wood
Victor B. Caldwell	XIII	Miss Nathalie Merriman
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